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EPA ENVIRONMENTAL BULLETIN

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 10 Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington

July 2006

Swift Creek Site, Sumas, Washington

In March 2006, the Whatcom County Health Department asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to help determine if there are potential health risks from naturally occurring asbestos in stockpiled dredge materials from Swift Creek.

EPA collected soil samples from the dredge piles in April and May. The sample results showed the piles contain levels of asbestos that could pose a health risk if the asbestos fibers get into the air where people can breathe them into their lungs.

We need to sample the air during dust-generating activities, such as digging and raking, to see if the asbestos fibers are released into the air. This is called "activity-based sampling" and is being planned for the week of August 14th.

We are committed to meeting with the local community to provide updates about our work. You may also contact us any time if you have questions (*see reverse side for contact information.*)

What we know:

- Soil sampling has shown levels of asbestos in the dredge piles at concentrations that are of concern;
- Asbestos fibers are not a health risk unless they get into the air where people can breathe them into their lungs;
- In our soil sampling we found asbestos fibers of the type and size that could pose a health risk.
- "Activity-based" air sampling is needed to assess whether the asbestos fibers pose a health risk

Next steps:

- Meet with the local community to provide an update on the soil sampling;
- Conduct "activity-based" air sampling during the week of August 14th;
- Determine a short-term solution for removing stockpiled dredge materials so that dredging can proceed this summer to prevent flooding;
- Develop a safe, long-term solution for managing dredged materials.

Isn't the asbestos in Swift Creek naturally occurring?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that is mined for industrial use. As a result of a historical landslide at Sumas Mountain, natural deposits of asbestos are exposed to the surface and are being released into Swift Creek. Regardless of whether the exposure comes from an industrial product or a naturally occurring source, all forms of asbestos can be toxic if breathed into the lungs.

Why can't the dredged material be removed as it has been in the past?

Our understanding is that local residents and businesses have historically used the stockpiled dredge materials for fill and other purposes. This practice has been discontinued until we can determine whether people could be exposed to asbestos fibers.

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How will this affect flood control in Swift Creek?

We are working closely with Whatcom County and other local, state and federal partners to come up with a safe, long-term solution for managing dredged materials from Swift Creek.

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Questions?

If you have further questions or would like more information, please contact:

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Background

Excessive sediment in Swift Creek is caused by a large, complex landslide in the upper watershed of Sumas Mountain. About 120,000 cubic yards of sediment is deposited into the creek system annually. The exposed slide material contains naturally occurring asbestos.

Swift Creek is dredged during most years to prevent flooding. In past years, dredged material was placed on the banks of Swift Creek and used as fill material by local residents and businesses.

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